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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the implementation of inclusion concepts and the attitudes of secondary teachers toward inclusion in one Midwest school district. Nineteen general and special education teachers were surveyed with a specially developed questionnaire. Follow-up interviews and class observations were also conducted. Data analysis indicated that participants generally felt that both teachers and students benefited from the inclusion program. Disadvantages identified by subjects included: lack of joint planning time; difficulties in matching general and special education teachers to avoid personality conflicts; territorial attitudes of some general education teachers who failed to share responsibility with the special education teacher; and lack of support for in and out-of-school professional meetings. The most commonly used teaching method reported was cooperative learning. Suggestions for preparing prospective teachers to work in inclusive settings are offered. The questionnaire is appended. (Contains 10 references.) (DB)

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By

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Secondary Teachers' Perceptions of Regular Education Initiative

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the implementation of inclusion and the perceptions among secondary teachers in a mid-west school district. Nineteen general education teachers and special education teachers participated in this study during the spring of 1999. Data were collected using both qualitative and quantitative methods. A questionnaire was developed by the researcher to collect teacher judgments of inclusion. Follow-up interviews and class observations were made to gather teacher perceptions and school applications of inclusion. Reported data indicated that participants considered both teachers and students benefited from the inclusive program. Reported disadvantages of the inclusion program from the participants were: lack of mutual time to plan; did not match general education and special education teachers early enough to avoid personality conflicts; some general education teachers treated their classes as their territory and failed to share equal responsibility with the special education teacher; and lack of support for in and out-of-school professional meetings. The most common used teaching method was cooperative learning. Suggestions for preparing perspective teachers to work in inclusive programs will be discussed.

key words: Inclusion; Regular Education Initiative

Secondary Teachers' Perceptions of Regular Education Initiative

I. Introduction

Schools now are expected to ensure that all students learn and perform at high levels. Teachers are expected to find ways to support and connect with the needs of all learners. The word inclusion is highly recognizable among educators, but operational definitions and perceptions differ from one school to another. The perceptions and implementation of inclusion may impact on the attitudes and success of inclusive programs. The Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) was developed in 1987 and this program will be in place in Indiana in the year 2001. In this program all beginning teachers are expected to understand and to be competent to teach students with different needs.

There is a need to ascertain how secondary teachers perceive inclusion and how they implement it. This information will provide teacher educators with helpful resources to train perspective teachers to teach in inclusive programs. The new IDEA (1999) places emphasis on teaching and learning and establishes high expectations for disabled children to achieve real educational results. Therefore, the teaching methods secondary teachers were applying in inclusive programs were the important data gathered through this project.

The purposes of this study sought to answer questions regarding REI/Inclusive programs at high schools. The methods of research consisted

of questionnaire surveys, classroom observations, and structured interviews. Questions included:

1. How do secondary teachers perceive REI programs?
2. How do they share responsibilities?
3. What teaching methods were applied?
4. How do they judge the success of the REI programs?
5. What were the advantages and disadvantages of REI programs?
6. How can the REI programs be more effective?
7. How should teacher preservice programs prepare perspective teachers for inclusive classrooms?

II. Perspectives

During the 1980s, the relationship between general and special educators attracted great attention of policy makers and researchers. The restructure of general and special education came to be known as REI (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997). The regular education initiative (REI) has transformed schools and teachers. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (formally called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act), along with the Americans with Disabilities Act, legislated that all exceptional children are to receive free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Special education has come a long way since these laws were passed. At the beginning of implementing these mandated laws, students with special needs were in resource rooms as pull-out program, or in self-contained classrooms. The academic instruction

provided was limited. In the 1990s, leaders in the inclusive schools movement suggested that general educators take more responsibilities for students with mild or moderate disabilities, with special educators serving as resources to regular classroom teachers. When mainstreaming took place, pull-in programs were mainly limited to elective classes such as art, music, physical education, and home economics. Today, inclusion is no longer a term circulated among special education teachers. However, teachers were positive yet ambiguous about its implementation. One of the reasons for this reaction, according to Hallahan and Kauffman (1997), was the placement of at risk students in REI. At risk students generally refer to students who perform or behave poorly in school and appear to fail or fall short of their potential. The function and purpose of placing at risk students in REI remains a question among researchers. However, this question has made teachers become more aware of the problems of students with special needs. There is a common understanding that there must be cooperation and collaboration between general and special educators to serve students with disabilities.

There is little research regarding REI/Inclusion (Jung, 1998). In one study, the reported data highlighted the effectiveness of REI, but questioned not only special education pull-out programs but also the stigmatizing of labeling students and diagnostic practices (Wang et al, 1986). REI had little research evidence either for or against its position at the start, but was able to be a persuasive force in education circles (Will, 1985).

In recent years, a few researchers have found students have gained social achievement in inclusive classes in elementary classrooms (Jung, 1998). However, secondary classroom teachers' perceptions of REI have not been a focus in these studies. In addition, general education teachers usually do not report their perceptions and experiences with REI in special education journals. There is a need to ascertain secondary teachers' perceptions of REI and how they are implementing this in their classrooms. This information will bring college training and public school experiences together to better prepare perspective teachers to teach in inclusive programs.

III. Methods and Procedures

This researcher initiated this study in the Spring of 1999. The participants were from two high schools with a combined student population of appropriately 3150 students in a school district in Indiana. Thirteen general education and six special education teachers participated in this study. A questionnaire was developed by the researcher to survey teachers' perceptions and the implications of REI (Appendix 1). Lengthy audiotaped interviews using structured questions with eleven teachers were conducted before and after observing their classrooms. Various classrooms with REI programs, including English, Social Studies, and Math classes, were observed. This researcher also interviewed special education department heads in these two high schools and the director of special education from the central administration office. Those secondary teachers included both males and females. Their years of experiences with REI ranged from twenty-one years to

one year. Data from the survey results were collected by using a Likert type five point scale. Excerpts from interviews and observations were documented in this report.

IV. Findings

Four hundred and twenty students out of 3,150 high school students were categorized as students with disabilities in these two high schools. This was approximately 13% of the population of the high school student body which was higher than national data for this population. Disabilities in these classes included: learning disabled, emotional disturbed, visual impairment, hearing impairment, orthopedic impairment and other physical impairments. In one school the mild mental retarded population was not included; and the severe profound handicapped were not included in the REI either. Forty percent (N=170) of these students were categorized as learning disabled which means the REI programs served students with learning disabled more than other categories which is consistent with national data. The years of teachers experience with teaching in REI was varied, with one school reporting an average of 7.1 and the other 4.8 years of experience.

Reported data indicated that teachers from these two schools perceive inclusive programs differently. In one school 6 out of 8 teachers agreed that the resources were adequate, in the other school teachers were not sure in this regard (6 out of 11). Teachers from one school agreed that they had time to plan and solve problems (4 out of 8), the other group disagreed (5 out of 11). Both schools disagreed (7 out 8 & 7 out of 11) that on-going staff development

was available to discuss issues. Both schools also reported the lack of specialized support personnel (4/8 & 8/11). Teachers in one school agreed that they can attend professional meetings regarding REI (6/8), the other strongly disagree with this statement (7/11). As for the size of REI classes, in one school teachers agreed the size of the REI (28) was appropriate (7/8), the other one disagreed (5/11).

Teaching methods used in REI classrooms were different between these two schools. One commonly used method in classrooms was cooperative learning . Teachers reported they used this method "most of the time (4/8 & 5/11). Peer tutoring was used "most of the time" in one school (5/11), but in the other school only one teacher reported he/she used this method "most of the time". Most teachers reported varied teaching methods such as "lecturing" (8/11), and "individual seat work" (7/8). Other teaching methods reported were: technology, guest speakers, group projects, group posters, and internet.

From interviews with participants, different perceptions of REI were reported. Both special and general educators reported that they have an extra hand in the classroom and they can learn from each other, reduce frustration, and motivate teachers to stay in the teaching profession. For students with disabilities, the advantages included exposure to general education classes and becoming part of the school, exceeding their achievement with extra help from the teachers, learning with other role models in grade-appropriate environments, breaking down the stereotype, raising self-esteem, and being

involved in extracurricular activities. The reported disadvantages were: problems happened when there was no common preparation time, did not match teachers with similar philosophy and personality, lack of appropriate staff development experiences, some general education teachers, especially for new teachers, were not well informed of the REI programs and that they "were scared and threatened at the beginning of the school year", some general education teachers treated their classrooms as their territories and the special education teacher as an aide and that they "did not feel valued as an equal partner", and some general education teachers did not participate in REI and questioned the cause and effect of REI.

The biggest concern of both the department head of special education and the director from the central administration office was the different treatment for discipline problems among general education students and special education students. These two department heads were involved in teaching in the REI classes in addition to their administration positions. They were busy with case conferences and paper work. They also have to deal with day to day crises and provide answers to teachers and parents. They were busy with responding and reactions. There was no time for them to be proactive and preplan. The director of special education in the school district supervised the process of implementing special education laws. She too was busy with many last minute requests and demands. Extra help from specialized personnel would be necessary for these administrators to communicate and evaluate the REI programs.

Suggestions for preparing perspective teachers to teach in inclusive programs were varied. They recommended training for perspective teachers including personal skills and professional skills. Personal skills included: understanding their own limitations and try to exceed the limitations, understanding students from dysfunctional families and be flexible. Professional skills included: organization skills, classroom management, and learning to work with team members in a nonthreatening and noncompetitive way. Teachers also suggested that perspective teachers need to admit things they don't know and become life long learners.

The writer's classroom observations found that many teachers assigned students to work on group projects. The noise level sometimes was high, but most of the time students were on task. Students were allowed to get out of their seats or step outside the classroom to calm themselves down or get fresh air. The individual attention was given when needed. Classrooms usually have structures, and classroom rules were reinforced from time to time. Some teachers were more lenient than others but learning was taking place. The coverage of the content was not too much since the teachers mentioned these students were not college bound.

V. Discussion

Most participants in this study were proud and eager to share their opinions and stories. From their responses the researcher listed the following concerns:

1. Definition. There was no concrete definition of REI/Inclusion among teachers. The participants used REI since their schools started implementing mainstreaming. Many teachers perceived REI and Inclusion were the same. They used these two terms interchangeably. As teacher educators strive to meet the requirement of federal laws and state mandates, an agreed-upon definition used in the same school district will be essential for the communication.

2. Placement. Placing students in Least Restrict Environment (LRE) has gone through a long debate. Revision of special education laws have been made. My observations and interviews with teachers in these two schools concluded that programs in these two schools were between "full-inclusion" and "partial-inclusion". Full-inclusion means that students with disabilities receive all their education within the general education classroom. While in one school students with learning disability and mild mental retardation were included in REI. Hearing impaired and visual impaired students occasionally were included. Most of the students were labeled as "at risk". "At risk" means these students may fail academically or drop out if they do not get extra help. Again, the definition of "at risk" is not clearly defined. Students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and diversity were not a focus in inclusion. The participants mentioned that students who were in REI classrooms were not college bound. Whether these students should be excluded from college preparation and when and how can they be placed with students in academic programs, these questions will be areas deserve some

attention. In addition, general education teachers who were in REI were on a voluntary basis. In other words, not every teacher in these schools participated in REI. According to Keefe and Davis (1998), inclusive programs imply that all students, teachers, parents, and community members was accepted and involved. More teachers involvement and participation may increase the effectiveness of REI.

3. Training. Almost all participants reported that little staff development time was dedicated to provide necessary training for new teachers or allow experienced teachers to share their experiences regarding REI. Many new teachers were not well informed or given time and opportunities to be confident in teaching in REI classrooms. Limited budget prohibited teachers from having released time to attend off campus professional meetings. Specicher's (1995) study with teachers and principles in Indiana concluded that the more professional development the more positive the teachers' attitudes. More support from the building or central administration is necessary for REI to be effective. Many teachers indicated that the schools were busy with PBA (Performance-Based Assessment) this year. Their attention and time were focused on PBA. The priority of needs should be a consideration among administrators.

4. Peer -tutoring. From this study peer-tutoring was not strongly promoted in the whole schools. However, Ferguson's (1998) study indicated that general education students who were involved in peer-tutoring have more positive attitudes toward students with disabilities. Training for peers to be tutors may

help both students with disabilities and general education students. At present since students who were enrolled in REI either with disabilities or labeled as at risk, may be the reason that peer tutoring was not heavily implemented.

5. Cost of Inclusion. Seven out of nineteen participants reported that they were not sure whether the REI programs cost more to implement. A study in Indiana indicated that inclusive programs were fiscally cost-effective as compared to traditional special education programs (Roahrig, 1995). Further, National Association of State Boards of Education in its 1992 report suggested that " Funding requirements should not drive programming and placement decisions for students (NASBE, 1992)." Allocated funding from both state and local district is crucial for the success of inclusion programs.

The Working Forum on Inclusive Schools, a consortium of 10 national educational associations identified the following characteristics of inclusive schools in 1994;

1. a sense of community
2. leadership
3. high standards
4. collaboration and cooperation
5. changing roles and responsibilities
6. an array of services
7. partnership parents
8. flexible learning environments

9. strategies based on research

10. new forms of accountability

11. access

12. continuing professional development.

From this study these two schools have demonstrated most of the characteristics. Areas of concerns listed above may need attention from school personnel and the administrators.

V. Conclusion

In a school of inclusive classrooms, teachers believe that every student can learn and will succeed, and all school personnel accept responsibility for helping students with disabilities to learn. Schools must develop the commitment to recognize and value students with disabilities. Schools also must establish a system in which all students have opportunities to reach their potential. The preparation for school personnel and students to be aware of and sensitive to students with specials needs should be an important step for inclusive programs.

The success of inclusive programs relies on many factors. The continuous collaboration and communication between general and special educators is essential. Although generalizations of the results of this study are limited due to the number of participants, the findings from this study provide enough evidence to warrant the consideration of teacher educators when planning curriculum. The on-going staff development should be scheduled and implemented every year. Students' placements need to be

based on the individual characteristics of the student and service available rather than on the disability category. The developing and evaluating of Individual Education Plan (IEP) need to be in each student's portfolio. Parent involvement will be crucial in serving students with special needs.

Special education is instruction focused on individual needs. The move toward inclusion is and will continue to be a trend. To provide special education means to set priorities and select carefully what needs to be taught in a special way. In teacher education programs, it is important to emphasize knowledge and responsibility of being a teacher no matter whether this perspective teacher is a general or special education teacher. Teaching skills which can accommodate students with special needs should be included in the teacher training program. Perspective teachers must also be prepared to participate in problem-solving with building-level teams and parents.

Upon conclusion of this study, this researcher found that every participant in this study recognized the value of integrating individuals with disabilities into regular classrooms. The remaining concerns center on how inclusion is implemented and what is the least restrictive environment for each student with disabilities. In the meantime, the recognition of and encouragement to the teachers who are involved in REI will help teachers to maintain and renew their commitment to their teaching effectiveness.

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Appendix 1

My Perceptions of REI (Inclusion)

I am a (1) general ed. (2) special ed. teacher.
I have been involved in REI (Inclusion) for ____ years.
I. Please respond to the following questions. There is no right or wrong answers. You will circle the number that is **true to your thinking**. The numbers indicate "5" as "strongly agree", "4" as "agree", "3" as "not sure", "2" as "disagree", and "1" as "strongly disagree".

1. The resources are adequate to provide the aids, support, & accommodation needed in our building. 5 4 3 2 1

2. Time is available for me to plan and do group problem solving.
5 4 3 2 1

3. The school atmosphere is welcomed and can accommodate diversity.
5 4 3 2 1

4. The ongoing staff development to discuss issues on REI is available in our school. 5 4 3 2 1

5. Specialized support personnel are available to the REI program.
5 4 3 2 1

6. REI program costs more to implement.
5 4 3 2 1

7. I can attend professional meetings regarding REI with all support from my school.
5 4 3 2 1

8. I think the class size for REI class is appropriate.
5 4 3 2 1

II. Please indicate the **teaching methods** that you have used in your teaching. The numbers indicate "5" as "always", "4" as "most of the time", "3" as "sometimes", "2" as "once in a while", and "1" as "never".

1. Cooperative learning 5 4 3 2 1

2. peer tutoring 5 4 3 2 1

3. reciprocal teaching 5 4 3 2 1

4. lecturing 5 4 3 2 1

5. individual seat work 5 4 3 2 1

6. others(please be specific): _____